

Sayings of Church Fathers On Fasting

The following sayings of the Holy Fathers of the desert put the discipline of fasting in the proper perspective. As the true masters of fasting, they, more than any other Christians, are the ones who can best teach us its true nature.

† A leader of a community asked Abba Poemen: "How can I gain the fear of God?" Abba Poemen replied: "How indeed can we gain the fear of God when we have bellies full of cheese and jars of salted fish?" Abba Poemen thus teaches us that the ultimate goal of fasting is to help lead us, or to open us, to the fear of God.

† Another old man came to see one of the Fathers, who cooked a few lentils and said to him: "Let us say a few prayers," and the first completed the whole Psalter, and the brother recited the two great prophets by heart. When morning came, the visitor went away, and they forgot the food. Fasting here witnesses that the true nourishment of Christians is prayer and meditation on the word of God, not the eating of food.

† A brother was hungry early in the morning, and he fought his desire so as not to eat before the third hour. When the third hour came, he forced himself to wait until the sixth hour. At that time he broke his loaves and sat down to eat, then stood up again, saying to himself: "Now wait until the ninth hour." At the ninth hour he said the prayer and saw the power of the devil like smoke rising from his manual work, and his hunger vanished.

† It was said of an old man that one day he wanted a small fig. Taking one, he held it up in front of his eyes, and not being overcome by his desire, he repented, reproaching himself for even having had this wish. Fasting in both of these cases is the spiritual effort which establishes the spirit over the flesh.

† Abba Joseph asked Abba Poemen: "How should we fast?" And Abba Poemen said: "I myself think it's good to eat every day a little at a time so as not to get full." Abba Joseph said: "Well, when you were young, didn't you used to fast for two days at a time?" And the old man said: "Believe me, indeed I did, for three days, and even a week. But the great elders tried all of this, and found that it is good to eat every day a little less each time. In this way, they showed us the royal highway, for it is light and easy." Abba Poemen teaches us that we should be careful not to undertake efforts too great for us. This gives the proper perspective in relation to the efforts praised in selections 3 and 4 above. It is better to make slow and steady progress with moderate efforts than to become discouraged or to miss the goal altogether with efforts too great for us.

† Once two brothers went to visit an old man. It was not the old man's habit, however, to eat every day. When he saw the brothers, he welcomed them with joy, and said: "Fasting has its own reward, but if you eat for the sake of love, you satisfy two commandments, for you give up your own will and also fulfill the commandment to refresh others."

† A brother said to an old man: "There are two brothers. One of them stays in his cell quietly, fasting for six days at a time, and imposing on himself a good deal of discipline, and the other serves the sick. Which one of them is more acceptable to God?" The old man replied: "Even if the brother who fasts six days were to hang himself up by the nose, he could not equal the one who serves the sick." Here we learn that love is above fasting, that we must not presume to put our fasting above "the more excellent way," the "new commandment" to love one another.

† There was a man who was leading an ascetic life and not eating bread. He went to visit an old man. It happened that pilgrims also dropped by, and the old man fixed a modest meal for them. When they sat together to eat, the brother who was fasting picked up a single soaked pea and chewed it. When they arose from the table, the old man took the brother aside and said: "Brother, when you go to visit somewhere, do not display your way of life, but if you want to keep to it, stay in your cell and never come out." He accepted what the old man said, and after that behaved like the others whenever he met with them. We are reminded here that fasting must be done in secret, not before others, as the Lord has said: "But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly." --St. Matthew 6:17-18

† It was said about an old man that he endured seventy weeks of fasting, eating only once a week. He asked God about certain words in the Holy Scripture, but God did not answer him. Then he said to himself: "Look, I have put in this much effort, but I haven't made any progress. So now I will go to see my brother and ask him." And when he had gone out, closed the door and started off, an angel of the Lord was sent to him, and said: "Seventy weeks of fasting have not brought you near to God. But now that you are humbled enough to go to your brother, I have been sent to you to reveal the meaning of the words." Then the angel explained the meaning which the old man was seeking, and went away. Along with fasting there must be humility! Fasting opens the way; it is a means to an end; it is not the end itself.

† I myself once harshly judged a monk whom I saw drinking milk during the Great Fast. He did it so routinely that I thought, "Why, he must think nothing of the ascetic life." It was I who had forgotten the rule of the inner life -- that one judges himself and excuses others. I later learned that the monk was ill and had to have milk to ingest his medication. I learned something about hasty judgments. Here we learn that we must never judge another person.

Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said: "Abba, as much as I am able I practice a small rule, a little fasting, some prayer and meditation, and remain quiet, and as much as possible I keep my thought clean. What else should I do?" Then the old man stood up and stretched out his hands toward heaven, and his fingers became like ten torches of flame. And he said: "If you wish, you can become all flame." We must never be short-sighted about the goal of our Christian life with all its efforts. It is nothing less than theosis, union with the Living God, becoming "all flame."

Holy Hierarch Basil the Great

† Do you fast? Then feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, visit the sick, do not forget the imprisoned, have pity on the tortured, comfort those who grieve and who weep, be merciful, humble, kind, calm, patient, sympathetic, forgiving, reverent, truthful and pious, so that God might accept your fasting and might plentifully grant you the fruits of repentance.

Fasting of the body is food for the soul.

† It is necessary most of all for one who is fasting to curb anger, to accustom himself to meekness and condescension, to have a contrite heart, to repulse impure thoughts and desires, to examine his conscience, to put his mind to the test and to verify what good has been done by us in this or any other week, and which deficiency we have corrected in ourselves in the present week. This is true fasting.

† As bodily food fattens the body, so fasting strengthens the soul; imparting it an easy flight, it makes it able to ascend on high, to contemplate lofty things and to put the heavenly higher than the pleasant and pleasurable things of life.

† The point is not only that we should come to church each day, that we should continually listen to one and the same thing, and that we should fast for the whole Forty Days. No! If we, from continually coming here and listening to the teaching, do not acquire anything and do not derive any good for our soul from the time of the fast all this does not procure for us any benefit, but rather serves for our greater condemnation, when despite such concern for us by the Church we remain just the same as before.

Do not say to me that I fasted for so many days, that I did not eat this or that, that I did not drink wine, that I endured want; but show me if thou from an angry man hast become gentle, if thou from a cruel man hast become benevolent. If thou art filled with anger, why oppress thy flesh? If hatred and avarice are within thee, of what benefit is it that thou drinkest water? Do not show forth a useless fast: for fasting alone does not ascend to heaven.

† Fasting is wonderful, because it tramples our sins like a dirty weed, while it cultivates and raises truth like a flower.

Selected Sayings of St. Seraphim of Sarov on Fasting

† On Fasting.

"Prayer, fasting, vigils, and all other Christian practices, however good they are in themselves, do not constitute the goal of our Christian life, although they serve as a necessary means to its attainment. The true goal of our Christian life consists in the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God. Fasting, vigils, prayers, alms-giving and all good deeds done for the sake of Christ are but means for the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God. But note, my son, that only a good deed done for the sake of Christ brings us the fruits of the Holy Spirit. All that is done, if it is not for Christ's sake, although it may be good, brings us no reward in the life to come, nor does it give us God's grace in the present life."

"It is not suited to everyone to follow a severe rule of abstinence from everything, or to deprive himself of everything which can serve for the easing of weakness."

"One should make use of food daily to the extent that the body, fortified, may be the friend and assistant of the soul in the practice of virtue. Otherwise, the soul may weaken because it is exhausted."

"On Wednesdays and Fridays, especially during the four fasts, eat once a day, and the angel of the Lord will remain with you."

† On the Active Life

"The way of the active life consists in fasting, abstinence, vigils, prostrations, and other bodily practices, which constitute the narrow and painful way that leads, according to the saying of God, to life eternal" (Matt. 7:14).

St. John Chrysostom on Fasting

(from his Homilies on the Statues)

† When the fast makes its appearance, like a kind of spiritual summer, let us as soldiers burnish our weapons, and as harvesters sharpen our sickles, and as sailors order our thoughts against the waves of extravagant desires, and as travellers set out on the journey towards heaven. Lay hold of the pathway which leads towards heaven, rugged and narrow as it is. Lay hold of it, and journey on.

† I speak not of such a fast as most persons keep, but of real fasting; not merely abstinence from meats, but from sins as well. For the nature of a fast is such that it does not suffice to deliver those

who practice it unless it is done according to a suitable law. So that when we have gone through the labour of fasting we do not lose the crown of fasting, we must understand how and in what manner it is necessary to conduct the business since the Pharisee also fasted, but afterward went away empty and destitute of the fruit of fasting. The Publican did not fast, and yet he was accepted in preference to him who had fasted in order that you may learn that fasting is unprofitable unless all other duties accompany it.

† Fasting is a medicine. But like all medicines, though it be very profitable to the person who knows how to use it, it frequently becomes useless (and even harmful) in the hands of him who is unskillful in its use.

For the honour of fasting consists not in abstinence from food, but in withdrawing from sinful practices, since he who limits his fasting only to abstinence from meats is one who especially disparages fasting.

Do you fast? Give me proof of it by your works. If you see a poor man, take pity on him. If you see an enemy, be reconciled with him. If you see a friend gaining honour, do not be jealous of him. And let not only the mouth fast, but also the eye and the ear and the feet and the hands and all members of your bodies.

† Let the hands fast by being pure from plundering and avarice. Let the feet fast by ceasing from running to unlawful spectacles. Let the eyes fast, being taught never to fix themselves rudely on handsome faces, or to busy themselves with strange beauties. For looking is the food of the eyes, but if it be such as is unlawful or forbidden, it mars the fast and upsets the whole safety of the soul. But if it be lawful and safe, it adorns fasting. For it would be among things most absurd to abstain from lawful food because of the fast, but with the eyes to touch even what is forbidden! Do you not eat meat? Feed not upon lasciviousness by means of your eyes! Let the ear fast also. The fasting of the ear consists in refusing to receive evil speech and calumnies. It is written, "You shall not receive a false report" (Exodus 23:1).

† Let the mouth also fast from disgraceful speech. For what does it profit if we abstain from fish and fowl and yet bite and devour the brothers and sisters. The evil speaker eats the flesh of his brother and bites the body of his neighbour. Because of this Paul utters the fearful saying, "If you bite and devour one another take heed that you are not consumed by one another" (Gal.5:15). You have not fixed your teeth in his flesh, but you have fixed your slander in his soul and inflicted the wound of evil suspicion, and you have harmed in a thousand ways yourself, him and many others, for in slandering your neighbour you have made him who listens to the slander worse, for should he be a wicked person, he becomes more careless when he finds a partner in his wickedness. And should he be a just person, he is tempted to arrogance and gets puffed up, being led on by the sin of others to imagining great things concerning himself. Besides this, you have

struck at the common welfare of the Church herself, for all those who hear you will not only accuse the supposed sinner, but the entire Christian community....

† And so I desire to fix three precepts in your mind so that you may accomplish them during the fast: to speak ill of no one, to hold no one for an enemy, and to expel from your mouth altogether the evil habit of swearing.

For as the harvester in the fields comes to the end of his labours little by little, so we too if we make this rule for ourselves and in any manner come to the correct practice of these three precepts during the present Fast and commit them to the safe custody of good habit, we shall proceed with greater ease to the summit of spiritual wisdom. And we shall reap the harvest of a favourable hope in this life, and in the life to come we shall stand before Christ with great confidence and enjoy those unspeakable blessings of which, God grant, we may all be found worthy through the grace of Jesus Christ our Lord, with whom be glory to the Father, and to the Holy Spirit unto ages of ages. Amen!

Holy Righteous John of Kronstadt

† The greatest of the virtues is prayer, while their foundation is fasting.

† The reason that fasting has an effect on the spirits of evil rests in its powerful effect on our own spirit. A body subdued by fasting brings the human spirit freedom, strength, sobriety, purity, and keen discernment.

Holy Hierarch Ignaty Brianchaninov

† If thou, O man, dost not forgive everyone who has sinned against thee, then do not trouble thyself with fasting. If thou dost not forgive the debt of thy brother, with whom thou art angry for some reason, then thou dost fast in vain God will not accept thee. Fasting will not help thee, until thou wilt become accomplished in love and in the hope of faith. Whoever fasts and becomes angry, and harbours enmity in his heart, such a one hates God and salvation is far from him.

Venerable Ephraim the Syrian

† A excellent faster is he who restrains himself from every impurity, who imposes abstinence on his tongue and restrains it from idle talk, foul language, slander, condemnation, flattery and all manner of evil speaking, who abstains from anger, rage, malice and vengeance and withdraws from every evil.

† Let thy mind fast from vain thoughts; let thy memory fast from remembering evil; let thy will fast from evil desire; let thine eyes fast from bad sights: turn away thine eyes that thou mayest not see vanity; let thine ears fast from vile songs and slanderous whispers; let thy tongue fast from slander, condemnation, blasphemy, falsehood, deception, foul language and every idle and rotten word; let thy hands fast from killing and from stealing another's goods; let thy legs fast from going to evil deeds: Turn away from evil, and do good.

Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk

† Seest thou what fasting does: it heals illnesses, drives out demons, removes wicked thoughts, makes the heart pure. If someone has even been seized by an impure spirit, let him know that this kind, according to the word of the Lord, "goeth not out but by prayer and fasting" (Matthew 17:21).

Saint Athanasius the Great

† The strictness of the Quadragesima [the Forty Days] mortifies the passions, extinguishes anger and rage, cools and calms every agitation springing up from gluttony. And just as in the summer, when the burning heat of the sun spreads over the earth, the northern wind renders a benefaction to those who are scorched, by dispersing the sultriness with a tender coolness: so fasting also provides the same, by driving out of bodies the burning which is the result of overeating.

Saint Asterius of Amasia

† Fasting is the mother of health; the friend of chastity; the partner of humility (illnesses are frequently born in many from a disorderly and irregular diet).

Venerable Simeon, the New Theologian

† Give the body as much food as it needs, and thou shalt receive no harm, even if thou shouldst eat three times a day. If a man eats but once a day, but undiscerningly, what benefit is there to him from that. The warfare of fornication follows excess in eating - and after this the enemy weighs down the body with sleep in order to defile it.

Saints Barsanuphius and John

† As a flame of fire in dry wood, so too is a body with a full belly.

Venerable Isaac the Syrian

† Always establish one and the same hour for taking food, and take it for fortifying the body and not for enjoyment.

Venerable Anthony the Great

† Do not neglect the Forty Days; it constitutes an imitation of Christ's way of life.

Saint Ignatius the God bearer

† The holy fasters did not approach strict fasting suddenly, but little by little they became capable of being satisfied by the most meagre food. Despite all this they did not know weakness, but were always hale and ready for action. Among them sickness was rare, and their life was extraordinarily lengthy.

† To the extent that the flesh of the faster becomes thin and light, spiritual life arrives at perfection and reveals itself through wondrous manifestations, and the spirit performs its actions as if in a bodiless body. External feelings are shut off, and the mind that renounces the earth is raised up to heaven and is wholly immersed in the contemplation of the spiritual world.

Venerable Seraphim of Sarov

† The more days of fasting there are, the better the healing is; the longer the period of abstinence, the more abundant the gain of salvation is.

Blessed Augustine

† Fasts do not shorten a man's life. Venerable Symeon the Stylite lived for 103 years, Saint Cyril the Anchorite lived 108 years, Saint Alypius the Stylite 118, Venerable John the Silent 104 years, Anthony and Theodosius the Great for 105 years, Venerable Paul of Thebes 113, Paul of Komel - 112, Venerable Macarius of Alexandria 100, Venerable Sergius of Radonezh 78, Venerable Cyril Belozersky 90, Macarius Zheltovodsky 95.